

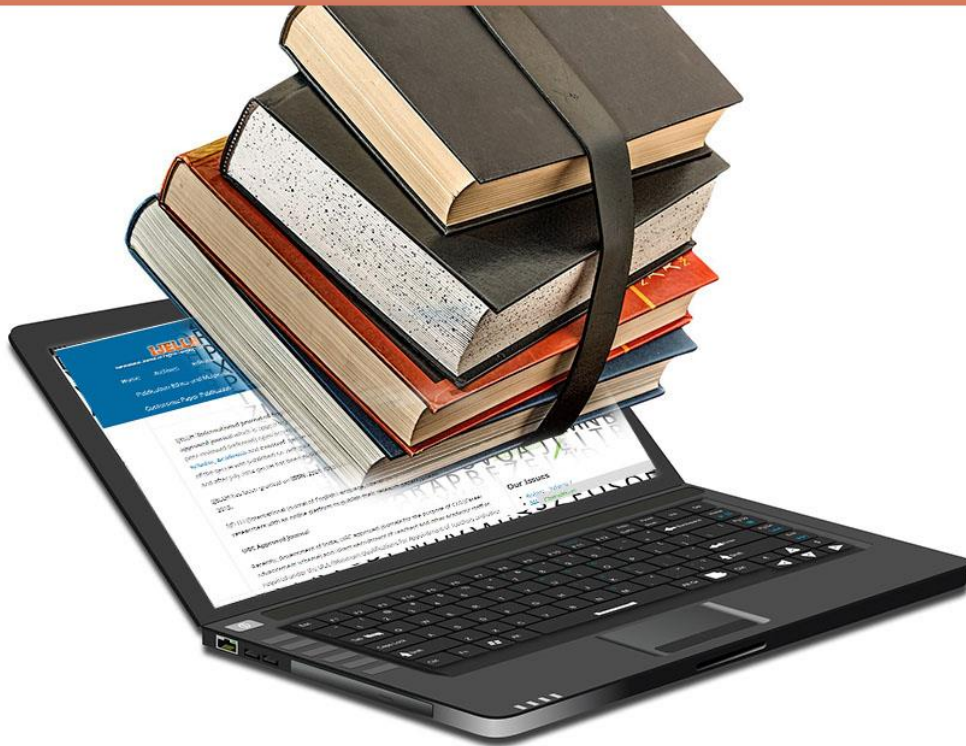
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Nostalgia in Intizar Hussain's 'The Sea Lies Ahead': Muhajirs as a diasporic
community

Abstract

The term 'diaspora' is often loosely used in an inclusive, capacious fashion when referring to all migrant communities. But recent diaspora theorists prefer to use the term in a more restrictive sense where only those communities which have retained the memory of migration can be categorized as diaspora. Thus nostalgia becomes a prerequisite for a migrant community to be called diaspora. Intizar Hussain's novel 'Aage Samandar Hai', translated as 'The Sea Lies Ahead', represents Muhajir characters who affirm their Muhajir identity by holding on to customs and culture of their places of origin. This essay will analyze how the Muhajirs can be called a diaspora because nostalgia for lost homeland forms a major part of their self fashioned identity. It will also look at the various, often contradictory, attitudes towards abandoned homeland that can be observed in Muhajirs, and study the novel in the tradition of the old elegiac shehr afsos mode where the Muhajirs lament for the cities and towns they left behind.

Key words: diaspora, homeland, Muhajir, refugee, memory

Introduction

The term ‘diaspora’ has recently become enormously popular in academic discourse. It is often loosely used in an inclusive, capacious fashion when referring to all migrant communities. But thinkers like Martin Sokefield and Rogers Brubaker have drawn our attention to the fact that the proliferation of the meaning of the term has caused it to lose its preciseness¹. Recent theorists like Khachig Tololyan have emphasized the need to use the term carefully and in a more restrictive sense where only those communities which have retained the memory of migration can be categorized as diaspora. Following this argument, nostalgia becomes a prerequisite for a migrant community to be called diaspora.

Intizar Hussain’s novel *Aage Samandar Hai*, translated by Rakshanda Jalil as *The Sea Lies Ahead*², is a narrative set in Karachi, revolving mainly around Muhajir characters. This paper will explore how the Muhajirs can be categorized as a diaspora because of the way they self-fashion their identity based on nostalgia. In the novel, we encounter Muhajir characters who affirm their identity by holding on to customs and culture of their places of origin. Nostalgia in Muhajirs becomes even more interesting because they do not originate from one particular town or city in India. Muhajirs are a community who had different place-based affiliations in India but after migration, there is a sense of unity in them. This paper will trace the importance of nostalgia for homeland in the self fashioning of this community which later becomes a political force to reckon with in Pakistan.

Who are the Muhajirs?

According to the manifesto of Muhajir Qaumi Party (MQM), Muhajirs are the refugees who migrated from Muslim minority provinces of India to Pakistan during Partition, and who did not belong to one of the four main ethnic groups of Pakistan³. In effect, the Urdu-speaking refugees who had migrated from parts of North India and settled down in

urban areas of Sindh came to be known as Muhajirs. The term ‘muhajir’ has undergone a drastic transformation in its meaning over years. A part of Pakistan’s political vocabulary from the start, initially it had a positive connotation and was used to appeal to the religious consciousness of the local inhabitants. The term ‘Muhajir’ originally referred to the very first followers of Prophet Muhammad, who migrated with him from Mecca to Medina. Hence, the term was consciously employed to encourage the already existing population in Pakistan to be hospitable to the newcomers for the sake of religion. However, with time, the term became restrictive and applicable to the Urdu speaking migrants only. These Urdu speakers clung to their individual identity and became a political force to reckon with, especially with the rise of MQM in the 1980s. They took immense pride in what they thought to be their superior urban culture and hence did not mingle in with the prevalent lifestyle of Karachi.

How are Muhajirs a diaspora?

Rogers Brubaker’s analysis finds three crucial pre-requisites for a community to be termed a diaspora: dispersion, homeland-orientation and boundary maintenance (Brubaker 5). Dispersion is, of course, necessary but, in itself, not enough. The second criterion emphasizes the importance of nostalgia in a diasporic consciousness. Homeland-orientation can be seen in the way Hussain describes the Muslim refugees from India as ‘Hind ke Mussalman’. One finds the Muhajirs in Hussain’s novel continuously refer to their lost homes in India and create a collective myth around it. The abandoned homes are looked back at with a nostalgic lens as an ideal but there is no attempt to go back. The protagonist, Jawad, makes a failed attempt to recreate the snapped connections in his erstwhile hometown, Vyaspur. He also considers renewing his romantic relationship with his cousin, Maimuna, which he had abandoned in the enthusiasm for the newly created Pakistan. But Maimuna is part of the elusive past to which he can never return. The third criterion, boundary

maintenance, can be seen in the Muhajirs' attempt to retain their unique identity vis-à-vis majoritarian culture. Many of the Muhajir characters in the novel engage in conversations which favour endogamy. It is not only that the Muhajirs do not want to marry the locals, they also want to marry Muhajirs who come from the same place in India as them. Thus, one may note how nostalgia for lost home and culture creates cultural pride in Muhajirs which, in turn, contributes to their strong ethnic consciousness.

Region-specific nostalgia but nevertheless a diaspora

It is very interesting to note that Muhajirs were not a cohesive unit before 1947 Partition and the consequent migration. When one encounters Muhajir characters in Hussain's novel recounting memories of homeland, one must note that they are not referring to one single home. Home is evoked at the scale of hometown, not at the level of nation. Their affiliation is highly regional in nature. The novel highlights their different place-based identities. Canonical diaspora theorists like Cohen have emphasized the importance of collective memory and nostalgia in diasporic communities. We find that the Muhajirs in the novel definitely idealize and mythify their abandoned homeland but they do so at a very regional level. The novel, through reiteration of place-based nostalgia, brings out the conflicts and differences among Muhajirs. There is a sense of shared 'we' but the discourse around individual origins becomes so prominent as to make us lose sight of the cohesiveness of Muhajir community. The shared memory of dispersion, flight, migration can be seen in the train journey motif that runs through the novel. Muhajirs who arrived in Pakistan keep asking each other, "How did you reach here? By which special?" (444) This shared nostalgia is what supports the Muhajirs' claim of being the fifth Qaum (nation or ethnicity) of Pakistan.

Nostalgia as an obstacle to assimilation

Critics like Rita Kothari, Priya Kumar and Nandita Bhavnani have compared the different trajectories in the experience of Sindhi Hindu refugees and the Muhajirs⁴. Unlike the Sindhi Hindu refugees, who adapted to the local culture and let their own culture be diluted away, the Muhajirs, as can be seen in the novel, jealously preserve their customs and culture. Refugees in general are people who are compelled into migrating to places over which they have no personal claim. What distinguishes Muhajirs from other refugees is the fact that they believe that they have a 'right' to the land of their migration. The Pakistan Movement had maximum support from the areas in North India where Muhajirs originate from. Hence, they looked at themselves as the founding fathers of the nation who ought to be heartily welcomed and given a position of importance in the new nation that they helped to build. They originated from urban centres which were the focal points of Islamic culture in undivided India. They prided themselves in their expertise in urbane sophisticated Urdu. And compared to their orthodox scriptural religious practices, they considered the Sufi-influenced Islam of Sindh a Hinduised version of the religion. Thus, the Muhajirs did not feel the need to assimilate with the local culture. They looked back with nostalgia at their abandoned centres of culture in India, felt cultural pride and shunned Sindhi cultural influence.

How is nostalgia expressed by Muhajirs?

Khachig Tololyan emphasizes the importance of cultural practices as a means of preserving distinct diasporic identity. The Muhajirs in the novel attempt to affirm their identity by holding on to certain rites associated with their lost homeland. Attachment to homeland is specifically evoked through two things: food and mushairas. Food becomes a way of preserving locally circumscribed identities and articulating connection to erstwhile homelands. The Muhajirs also affirm their identity by clinging on to the tradition of poetry recitals and competitions. The Muhajirs not only proclaim the superiority of the culture that

they brought to Pakistan vis-à-vis the culture of the already existing population, they also scramble to prove that the food or poetry of their abandoned hometown is better than other Muhajirs’.

In this novel, one encounters Muhajirs who are arrested in the past. That is probably the reason why time and chronology are not of crucial importance in this novel. It is interesting that, although settled in Pakistan for several decades, the characters mention each other with reference to the places of their origin, which now lie in India. We find that the “Lucknow-walas don’t let any opportunity to taunt the Delhiwalas pass” (1141). While arranging marriages, the origin of a prospective bride or groom turns out to be of utmost importance. Mushairas, language, poetry as well as food and clothes from the places of their origin continue to be popular with the migrants. Majju Bhai wears “a black shervani cut in the typical Aligarh style” along with “a white Rampuri cap” (478). In mushairas, he is surrounded by poets who derive their pen names from the qasbas of their origin. In nom de plums like “Amrohvi, Badauni, Galauthvi, Etawi” (478) can be seen an attempt to hold on to the lost homeland. A marriage is about to be called off because a “Meerutwala” dares to boast of a local sweet dish called “til bugga” in front of the sophisticated “Lucknow-walas” who bask in the glory of their “ahl-e-zubaan” (935). Mirza sahib recalls the splendor of his office in Raisina where any visitor would have to wait in long queues to gain an interview with him. But here in Karachi, “there is neither chit nor chaprasi; anyone can walk in.” (651) Two lovers settle for a date at Clifton because they cannot go to Qutub Minar in Karachi (727). There is also a problematic nostalgic wishful longing for days when women’s sexuality could be controlled. A character complains, “They have thrown their burqas away since coming to Karachi.” (737) Speaking of women’s free access to the outer world, Saadat’s mother laments, “In our Delhi, old timers used to say that a good wife enters her home in a doli and leaves on a bier” (1169).

Majju Bhai analyses the problem underlying Karachi. People from various origins have sought refuge in Karachi, just the way many rivers join a sea. However, for a harmonious existence, the rivers have to lose themselves in the sea. The problem with Karachi is that all the different ethnic groups claim “I am the sea”. Majju Bhai observes that not only do the Muhajirs from famous towns and cities speak of their lost grandeur, but even people from small qasbas are found “blowing their own trumpet since coming to Karachi.” Tauseef, who is originally from Meerut, finds the Lucknow-walas’ arrogance for their culture disturbing. This makes him want to “give them a glimpse of our Meeruti culture” (1260).

Muhajirs’ attitude towards homeland

It is interesting to note that although there is a nostalgic attempt to transplant cultural practices of homeland in the new country, there can be found an attitude of disdain towards the ‘leftover’ culture since the time of the Muhajirs’ migration. There is an attempt to assert that the Muhajirs’ culture is better than that practiced by those who stayed behind in India. The Indian past is looked upon a pre-modern backward space. Akhtari Baji is confident, “The truth is that the real excitement was because of us. Who is left there now? Only the no-good inconsequential types remain...Those who belong to the low castes...” (3631). Here one may observe the wishful belief that dark days have come upon their homeland because they, the migrants, have abandoned it. Basho Bhabhi likes to think, “Our family was the pride of Lucknow; there is nothing but dust left since we came away” (3640).

The Muhajir identity is fraught with complexities because neither can they completely associate with Pakistan, nor can they reconnect with their lost homes in India. The protagonist, Jawad, is not a typical Muhajir. He stands apart from the rest and is contemptuous towards the various mushairas being organized in Karachi in a vain attempt to recreate the lost past. But he is also someone who could never completely adapt to Karachi.

Jawad is haunted by his platial memory of Vyaspur. Some of the most lyrical passages of the novel speak of Jawad's memory of trees in Vyaspur. Jawad is drawn towards characters who, like himself, are haunted by their pre-Partition memories. It is not that Jawad does not try hard enough to belong to Karachi. Just after arriving in Pakistan, he replies to a question about his origins by saying, 'Whichever the city was, it has been left behind. Now I am in this city.' But even then, after decades of what can be seen as a successful life in Karachi, he still feels like a 'stranger' (489). The Muhajirs can be read as strangers in the Derridean sense because they have entered the nation space of Pakistan at a later point and the moment of their entry can be pointed out. Their history of linguistic and political dispute with the local inhabitants, i.e. Sindhis shows that they may have had ample reason to feel like strangers.

The translator Rakshanda Jalil identifies the novel as one written in the tradition of the old elegiac shehr afsos mode where the Muhajirs lament for the cities and towns they left behind⁵. The entire novel reads like a lament for places lost. It is a novel circling around the event of Partition but it is not a part of riot literature. It rather focuses on the larger narrative of loss of places. It lyrically evokes the lost grandeur of cities that the Muhajirs left behind in India as well as the city of Karachi that they contributed to in Pakistan. The Muhajirs lament the deterioration of Karachi just as much as they bemoan the loss of their cultural centres in India. We find Mirza Sahab shedding tears over Delhi. He speaks out verses from Mir Taqi Mir's famous poem on Delhi, "Dilli jo ek shehar tha aalam mein intekhab" (Delhi that was once the pre-eminent city in the world) (641). Achhi Bi looks back at her life in Suiwala Mohalla, "those were different days, that time was different" (1178). The feast at the Meerutwalas promises to serve parathas like the ones served in Nauchandi Mela in Meerut (1214). Karbalai Sahab spends his old age in dreams of returning to his hometown, Shikarpur, because actual return is not possible.

The novel presents a world where the Muhajirs idealize and mythify their past in India. But interestingly, they do not desire to maintain any connection with what India is at present. Their homeland is only in the past, only in the nostalgic memory. There is no desire to continue connections with what has now become ‘enemy territory’ because return is not a possibility. In fact, various characters keep reminding each other the importance of letting go of memories. To quote Majju Bhai, “Land is the most God-awful thing. One is better off till one is not reminded of it” (1857). But the extent to which this advice is successful is to be questioned. We find Jawad revisiting his lost home and making a failed attempt to reunify the detached threads. Initially, after returning to Vyaspur, Jawad feels “together and whole”. But he ends up running away from India and his long-abandoned beloved Maimuna because a reunion with them is not possible anymore. The plight of the Muhajir is to not belong to either place. Jawad’s relatives in India look at him as a ‘Pakistani’ when he comes back. The Muhajirs in the novel fondly remember the past but, at the same time, express the need to move on with the present in Pakistan. They can only turn back and look at the homeland in memory but no actual return is possible. Even though Jawad is tormented by his memories, it is interesting how the family he left behind in India looks at him with accusation as someone who has forgotten his origins. Although most characters in the novel are ridden by nostalgia, the dangers of nostalgia for individual as well as communities are also reiterated throughout the novel: “Memory has its own Lakshman rekha. The moment you step over it, you land into trouble”(5251). The fact that the Muhajirs could not or did not let go of the memory of their past resulted in their lack of efforts to assimilate with the local Sindhis. And the political troubles and violence that arose out of their dispute is known.

Many diasporas, many nostalgias

Jawad, the protagonist, is a representative figure but the novel interrogates more than just individual experience. The novel is an exploration of the larger history of

migration. It is an exploration of the place of nostalgia in the collective consciousness of the Muslims. That is why the experience of the Muslim refugees from Andalusia taking refuge in Granada is alluded to time and again in the novel. The city of Granada acts as a parallel for the city of Karachi. Both these cities have served as a refuge for migrant Muslims, nostalgic for their lost homes. In fact, the novel is not limited to Muslim experience only. It is concerned with the larger narrative of seeking refuge. Hence, Intizar Hussain repeatedly mentions tales of migration similar to those of Urdu-speaking Muhajirs. He draws allusions to mythological migrations like those of Yadavas from Mathura to Dwarka. Hussain speaks of the eternal recurrence of the same predicament in the history of the Indian subcontinent as well as human civilization in general. Hussain tells Alok Bhalla, "the entire history of exile and migration during the Partition is a repetition of what people have experienced since the days of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata" (Bhalla 105). This is not a novel about the nostalgia of an individual protagonist, Jawad, or the community he belongs to, the Muhajirs. The novel is Hussain's tribute to the nostalgia that characterizes diasporas all over the world.

Conclusion

Intizar Hussain's 'The Sea Lies Ahead' is a novel that represents Muhajirs. Barely any character belongs to any other community. It is a novel of polyphony where there is a multiplicity of voices which interact and compete with each other. It gives space to different kinds of nostalgia and brings out the differences among various Muhajir groups. But one thing is common among all of them: nostalgia is present in all of them in some form or the other, and it forms an indelible part of their identity. The cohesive identity that they shape through nostalgia, even though they originate from various places, creates a sense of ethnic unity in them, which, in turn, contributes to their politicization.

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Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on this, see Brubaker 2005 and Sokefield 2006.
2. Further references to this text will be provided in parentheses and will refer to the location in the Kindle edition.
3. Quoted in Frotscher 2008, p. 88.
4. For a detailed discussion, see Bhavnani 2016, and Kumar and Kothari 2016.
5. See Introduction to the novel (96).

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